Abe's visit to Yasukuni Shrine a futile act of self-righteousness
EDITORIAL

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Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Yasukuni Shrine on Dec. 26, marking his first visit as prime minister. We have no choice but to be appalled at his inward-looking behavior and complete lack of responsibility.

For a long time, Abe had said it was "extremely regrettable" that he could not visit the shrine during his first tenure as prime minister from 2006 to 2007. At the same time, he refrained from visiting Yasukuni, which enshrines the war dead as well as Class-A war criminals, so that his visit would not lead to political and diplomatic problems.

But Abe made the controversial visit in defiance of such considerations on the first anniversary of the inauguration of his second administration. The way he chose the day has nothing to do with "the spirits of the war dead."

No matter what reasons the prime minister cites, there is no way the visit can be justified.

The reason is not just because China and South Korea are raising strong objections. It is because Abe's move has a serious impact on various matters including the way the Japanese people face war as well as Japan's national security and economy.

BREAKING FAITH WITH POSTWAR JAPAN

After the visit, Abe said: "I prayed for the souls of people who perished on the battlefield leaving behind their mothers and beloved wives and children. That is all there is to it."

We have no objections to wanting to mourn those who were embroiled in World War II and were forced to die unreasonable deaths.

However, visits to Yasukuni Shrine by active prime ministers and Cabinet ministers mean more than a simple gesture of mourning.

The Japanese Constitution requires the separation of government and religion. Behind the philosophy is the bitter experience of militarism and state Shintoism joining hands.

Before the war, Yasukuni Shrine was the center of state Shintoism, which enshrined dead military personnel as “gods.” Even after the war, it secretly enshrined Class-A war criminals, who led the war and sent young people to distant battlefields.

Given the contents of exhibits, which justify Japan’s prewar history, at Yushukan, a museum that stands on the grounds of the shrine, Yasukuni Shrine is more than an ordinary religious organization. It is clear that the shrine is a politically motivated entity to justify Japan's history of war.

If the prime minister visits it, he cannot escape criticism that he is affirming its historical recognition.

Still, if he visits the shrine in defiance of such criticisms, his act is nothing less than a declaration of intent to turn his back to the postwar course followed by the Japanese people who vowed never to make war while mourning the war dead.

CREATING UNNECESSARY PROBLEMS

China and South Korea, which suffered damage caused by Japan’s wartime aggression, are strongly objecting to Abe’s Yasukuni visit.

The visit is also an impolitic diplomatic move from the standpoint of East Asian security and economy.

This spring, Abe incurred criticism both at home and abroad with his remark, “The definition of aggression has yet to be finalized.”

Since then, he has checked himself from making controversial remarks concerning historical recognition.

Meanwhile, China shows no signs of stopping provocative actions around the Senkaku Islands. In November, it unilaterally set up an air defense identification zone over the East China Sea, prompting the United States and neighboring countries to express concern about the measure that causes unnecessary tensions.

South Korean President Park Geun-hye has been repeatedly making comments to criticize Japan to such leaders as U.S. President Barack Obama every time she visits another country. Even though Park's comments were triggered by historical views expressed by Japanese politicians, including Abe, her obstinate attitude has been inviting criticism even from within South Korea.

But there is no doubt Abe's Dec. 26 visit to Yasukuni Shrine will drastically change such a diplomatic atmosphere surrounding East Asia.

After all, it is Japan, which is unable to overcome the problem of history, that is a major destabilizing factor of the region. Such a view can spread at once. The unusual statement by Washington that it is "disappointed" at the prime minister's Yasukuni visit is telling.

No matter how hard diplomats and citizens work to improve relations and achieve reconciliation, a single word or act by a top leader can bring their efforts to naught.

Politicians who are supposed to solve problems are creating new ones. If Abe acted on his personal feelings of "extreme regret" or gave in to pressure from within the Liberal Democratic Party to show a firm attitude toward China and South Korea, his Yasukuni visit can only satisfy himself and the LDP. But the impact was too great and the outcome too futile.

Abe also visited "Chinreisha," a small shrine that stands next to the main building of Yasukuni Shrine, on Dec. 26.

Chinreisha honors all the war dead who are not enshrined in the main building. The prime minister said that he prayed for the souls of all the people who died in war and made a vow of nonaggression.

NEW MEMORIAL FACILITY

We wish to address the next question to Abe: If so, why not build a new facility to honor equally not only soldiers but all people, including civilians who were killed in air strikes and atomic bombings and those who died having been caught up in ground battles?

It should be a facility for mourning where anyone, including guests from other countries, can visit with a clear conscience regardless of religion.

It is obvious that persistency of politicians toward admiring Yasukuni Shrine where Class-A war criminals are enshrined together with the war dead is making all matters worse.

With the 70th anniversary of the end of the war approaching, how many more times are they going to repeat the same course?

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